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Defense Primer: DOD Domestic School System

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) manages federally funded school systems overseas and domestically that provide pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through grade 12 education, primarily for the children of active duty servicemembers living on military installations. In 2024, DODEA operated 160 schools globally with an enrolment of about 67,000 students. DOD's Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESSs) program operates 53 schools across 7 states, the Territory of Guam, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico as well as one virtual school. DDESS enrolls approximately 22,000 students and is supported by a staff of 4,311. Military families have generally cited the availability of DOD domestic schools as a quality-of-life benefit.

Legislative Background

Since the early 1800s, commanders on military installations had established their own schools. In 1950, Congress consolidated the funding and operation of installation-run schools under the Office of Education – later the Department of Education (ED) as part of Section 6 of P.L. 81-874. Between 1950 and 1980 these *Section 6* schools were established in locales where (1) state laws prohibited tax revenues of the state or any political subdivision of the state to be expended for free public education of children residing on federal property; or (2) education systems within the local communities were judged unable to provide suitable free public education. Though the law did not define “suitable” education, some were established to provide a racially integrated schooling option for children of servicemembers (e.g., Maxwell Elementary School, Alabama). Others were established at installations in remote or sparsely populated locations. The 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act (P.L. 97-35) shifted funding responsibility for all DOD schools from ED to DOD. In 1994, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1995 (P.L. 103-337) replaced the Section 6 legislation and renamed the school system the Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools. During that era, Congress sought to transfer control of many installation-based schools to local educational agencies (LEAs; P.L. 99-167). Congress has periodically requested studies on the divestiture of DOD domestic schools.

Authorities

Section 2164 of Title 10, United States Code, provides the statutory authority for the Secretary of Defense to enter into arrangements to provide for the elementary and secondary education for children of members of the Armed Forces and DOD civilian employees assigned domestically (to include any U.S. state, territory, commonwealth, or possession). Factors to be considered when determining whether to provide for domestic education include the extent to which

1) children are eligible for free public education in the local area adjacent to the military installation, and 2) the ability of LEAs to provide an “appropriate” public school educational program for such children.

Impact Aid

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has previously reported that approximately 1.1 million school-aged children have at least one parent in the military, and nearly 80% of these children attend non-DDESS public schools off military bases. Since 1950 (P.L. 81-874), LEAs have been authorized to receive financial aid, called *Impact Aid* from ED for “federally connected students” enrolled in local public schools to compensate for a “substantial and continuing financial burden” resulting from federal activities. DOD administers an Impact Aid Program in addition to the ED program for LEAs that meet certain conditions. For more background on ED and DOD Impact Aid, please see CRS Report R45400, *Impact Aid, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: A Primer*.

Enrollment Eligibility

Dependent children of U.S. military and DOD civilian employees living on an installation with a DDESS school are eligible to attend that school tuition-free. Other dependent children of DOD military, federal civilian employees, and foreign militaries may be eligible for tuition-free enrollment under certain circumstances. Children of DOD contractors are not eligible to enroll. DDESS schools may accept dependent children of other non-DOD federal agency employees for tuition reimbursement by the agency; however, DDESS may not accept tuition from individuals. Tuition rates for domestic schools for the 2024-2025 school year are between \$23,684 and \$26,176, depending on the student's grade.

DDESS Budget

The DDESS budget is supported by defense-wide Operation and Maintenance (O&M), Military Construction (MILCON), and Procurement appropriations. The O&M budget for DDESS includes items such as salaries, travel, contracts, supplies, and equipment. MILCON funds are typically appropriations for projects like new school construction or additions to existing schools.

Table I. DOD Domestic School O&M Funding
Current dollars in millions

	FY2023 (actual)	FY2024 (enacted)	FY2025 (request)
O&M	\$655.400	\$717.001	\$705.507

Source: DOD Comptroller, Budget Books.

Note: O&M enacted funding for overseas DOD schools was \$1.137 billion for FY2024.

Student Performance

DODEA primarily measures student performance annually within the DOD school system through College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) summative assessments. DODEA also participates in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is a standards-based national test administered at grades 4, 8, and 12 in nine subject areas. With respect to NAEP testing outcomes, DODEA schools in the aggregate often perform at or above U.S. national averages and better than the states in which the DDESS schools are located (see **Table 2**). For more on the NAEP and educational testing, see CRS Report R45048, *Basic Concepts and Technical Considerations in Educational Assessment: A Primer*.

Table 2. Comparison of DODEA and State Public School Scores to National Scores on the NAEP
% of students at or above proficient, 2022

Jurisdiction	Grade 4 Math	Grade 4 Reading	Grade 8 Math	Grade 8 Reading
Nation	35%	32%	26%	29%
DODEA	51%	50%	41%	55%
Alabama	27%	28%	19%	22%
Georgia	34%	32%	24%	31%
Kentucky	33%	32%	23%	29%
New York	28%	29%	28%	33%
North Carolina	35%	36%	26%	26%
South Carolina	34%	33%	22%	26%
Virginia	38%	32%	31%	31%

Source: NAEP, *The Nation’s Report Card*, 2022.
Notes: States listed are those with DDESS schools on military installations. DODEA figures include both domestic and overseas schools. State scores are for public schools only. Boxes shaded green indicate proficiency levels above national average, red boxes indicate proficiency levels below average and unshaded boxes indicate no statistically significant difference between state and national levels.

Issues for Congress

Status Quo v. Divestment Options

Some have questioned the continued need for DOD to own and operate domestic schools. Policy analysts have studied alternatives to the status quo for funding and operating DOD domestic schools, including, 1) closing all base schools and transferring students to LEAs; 2) transferring operations to an existing LEA, with DOD maintaining some responsibility for facilities; 3) establishing a new LEA covering the entire installation area (coterminous district); 4) converting DDESS schools into charter schools; and 5) contracting with an educational management organization to operate the system.

Proponents of divesting domestic schools and associated infrastructure argue that the operation of elementary and secondary schools is not essential to DOD’s core national security mission and creates unnecessary administrative

overhead. Some note that average per-student costs at DDESS schools are significantly higher than per-student costs at schools operated by LEAs. In addition, some point to future costs to maintain and upgrade existing school infrastructure. Proponents of shuttering these schools or maintaining the buildings on DOD property but turning them over to LEA control argue that these options could result in substantial government savings.

Proponents of maintaining the status quo contend that DDESS schools improve servicemember quality of life and serve as a retention incentive for military families with children. Some argue that DOD schools are better-equipped to provide for the unique needs of military children, for example, providing curriculum continuity for children who are subject to frequent moves. Some contend that LEAs may not have the resources, infrastructure, or administrative capacity to absorb all DDESS students and question whether LEAs would be able to provide the same quality of programs and services as DDESS. In addition, military parents may have reduced influence on LEA school policies as their eligibility to serve on LEA school boards may be subject to local residency restrictions. Some state and local officials are concerned that federal resources (i.e., Impact Aid) would not be sufficient to offset the additional state and local outlays that might be required to support a new LEA or the transfer of DDESS schools/students to an existing LEA.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are independently operated, government-funded public schools that are allowed to operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools. Between 2001 and 2012 there were eight charter schools established on military installations. These schools serve both military and civilian students and are eligible for Impact Aid funds. Proponents of charter schools on installations suggest that these schools might be more innovative and able to offer tailored services for military families. A 2013 Government Accountability Office report found challenges include installation security (e.g., access for civilian students), facility availability, lease requirements, financing, and limitations imposed by state laws.

Parental Rights and Disclosures

As added in the FY2024 NDAA (P.L. 118-31), 10 U.S.C. 2164a outlines parental rights for students attending DODEA schools. It also requires DODEA to provide certain notifications and disclosures to parents about standards/benchmarks, curriculum, and revisions to these and other programs.

Universal Pre-Kindergarten (pre-K)

The President’s FY2024 Budget Request included a proposal for universal pre-K at all DODEA schools. DODEA reports that it will begin implementation of tuition-free, full-day pre-K in the 2024-2025 school year. In the FY2024 NDAA (P.L. 118-31) Congress directed quarterly briefings on the implementation of this initiative until December 31, 2027.

Kristy N. Kamarck, Specialist in Military Personnel

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